FOR THE MAN WHO HAS EVERYTHING

November 16, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost." --Luke 19:10 (RSV)

Scripture
Luke 19:1-10

No less an authority than Karl Barth suggested that it is the responsibility of a Christian to have an open Bible in one hand and an open newspaper in the other; that the word of God emerges when the Bible and newspaper are in dialogue: that God's Biblical word is always uttered in a conversation with a worldly word.

And so this morning I should like, this once, to reverse the order - to begin with the newspaper and to regard its content, if not our text for the day, at least the contemporary context, the conversation into which God will enter with a good word...

Thus, a reading from the Business Section of the New York Times, selected passages from an article - "The Strange Agony of Success...Reaching the Top - or Making a Million Before 40 - is Unhinging Many Executives."

"Tens of thousands of young people are finding that in achieving business success today they have distorted their lives and fallen into emotional turmoil.

"In the era when success and money are more fashionable and sought after than they have been since the 1950's, the fast track is luring more and more college graduates with promises of power, prestige and big payoffs. But in these high-pressure, high-reward jobs - psychoanalysts say that many executives lose all sense of balance between their work and the other aspects of their lives."

They are known by a new title - "Victims of Success". No one knows how many there are but psychotherapists say the problem is growing as more people find success disappointing.

"Many people are coaxed into work habits that throw their lives badly out of balance. Worse, many find they are encouraged to betray their deepest values."

Cocaine, alcohol, broken marriages and families, depression -- are the symptoms of the malady. One man who cashed it all in punctuated the explanation of his decision with a curse which, the more I thought about it began to sound like an appeal, or even a confession. He said: "I

didn't want to be buried with the words 'Christ, he was busy'." [New York Times, 8/24/86, Section 3.]

And now a reading from the Gospel according to St. Luke, Chapter 19, verses 1-10:

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it they all murmured, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.

Zacchaeus, "victim of success," chief of the Internal Revenue Service for the City of Jericho, acted very strangely indeed. On the surface it appears that he climbed a tree because he was too short to see over the crowds and catch a glimpse of a teacher from Nazareth who had caused a great stir in the city. The way I read it, however, there is more to it than that. That climbing the tree business, that foolishly vulnerable behavior is the kind of thing people do when they are desperate, lonely and unhappy and brokenhearted and bankrupt. Successful, middle-aged people don't go around climbing trees, unless there is a major crisis in their middle-aged lives.

Frederick Buechner calls Zacchaeus "a sawed off little social disaster with a big bank account and a crooked job." [Peculiar Treasures, p. 180]. John Bodo, from whom I borrowed the title for this sermon called him "little Mr. Big of lovely Jericho...who had everything". [A Gallery of New Testament Rogues, p. 45]

What can be known about Zacchaeus is that he was rich and hated and short. That he was rich and that he was hated are related to each other. The Roman Empire had devised a despicable but effective method of collecting revenues from its conquered and occupied people. The secret of the tax system was that it relied on nationals to administer it and it rewarded them very handsomely. Instead of importing bureaucrats from the Capitol, the Romans hired local professionals to collect their taxes, and rewarded them for their onerous duty by paying them generously. In order to be a tax collector you had to be willing to forgo the affection and respect of your neighbors. Tax collectors were regarded simply as quislings, collaborators. Do you recall how collaborators were treated in Paris after World War II, or how deeply despised the Frenchmen were who governed France in the Vichy Regime under the Nazis? Here was Zacchaeus in Jericho of all places, a beautiful, prosperous city, of tremendous historical and religious significance, the Jericho of the Canaanites whose walls came tumbling down before the armies of Joshua, the equivalent, that is to say of Yorktown, Gettysburg, Valley Forge, and here is Zacchaeus, the

Jew, prospering enormously by collecting taxes from his countrymen for the hated Roman authorities.

It is more than idle conjecture, therefore, to propose that Zacchaeus was alienated, lonely, despised. And his stature - did that have something to do with it? Is it just another detail in this unusually graphic scenario which Luke lays out for us, or is there a story there too? Is there a story here of a person in lonely captivity to physical characteristics? A story of one who had been the brunt of so many jokes that his ego was already severely damaged, and for whom collaboration with the enemy was not the loss of anything important - because he was convinced he wasn't worth anything anyway. Is it a story that connects with the alienation experienced by anyone who ever looked in the mirror and wished desperately to see something else? Is it the story of every shorty, fatso, skinny, gimpy, blinkly - who ever laughed along with the crowd which amused itself cruelly at his or her expense only to ask in poignant, prayerful desperation, "God - why can't I be like them? Why did you make me this way?"

There are a lot of things about this story that reach across 2,000 years and touch sensitive spots and sometimes raw nerves in our lives. The best part of all, I think, in a sense the most poignant and powerful detail is that he climbed a tree in order to see Jesus. That is not consistent with what we now know about him. An important public official, particularly one who had sold his own soul in order to be important, is far more inclined to affect self-important behavior, to work hard at sustaining the image he has sold his soul to achieve. He will not risk ridicule, will not be vulnerable, will not appear foolish.

When Jesus looked up and saw him perched there, foolishly, vulnerably, pathetically, I like to believe, he understood perfectly, everything about Zacchaeus, a man who had everything and nothing.

"What Are You Doing With the Rest of Your Life?" Esquire magazine demands to know this month in a special year-end edition on Americans at Work. Sandwiched in between some of the most elaborate and opulent advertisements in print is a series of articles and editorials about the significance work has for Americans. Something is happening in America, the lead editorial concludes. We are learning, quite simply, that success does not save our souls, that happiness and contentment do not result when we have scraped, climbed and clawed our way to the top. Observes Phillip Moffitt, President and Editor in Chief of Esquire,

There is..."a growing awareness of the limits of individual achievement. (Zacchaeus discovered that 2,000 years before.) It means little to be individually affluent, urban or suburban, if you live a life without community, or in fear of crime, or with the threat of a deteriorating environment." [p. 48]

Mr. Moffitt predicts that the "Me Generation" is over, and that we are about to enter a new day of altruism and commitment to values better and bigger than the unapologetic individualism of the 1980's. One hopes his prediction is accurate. For there is no doubt that in fairly recent decades our culture has elevated having and owning and consuming to a new

level of sanctity. Prosperity has always been part of the American dream, but until the end of the Second World War, the perimeters of prosperity were modest, realistic - almost. Today we find ourselves part of an economy that demands ever-increasing consumption, planned obsolescence,... A hundred times a day, on television, radio, magazines and newspapers, we are told that what counts in life is buying, having, owning, and showing-off what we own.

In the same issue of Esquire that so relevantly explored the meaning of our consumer ethic, the Christmas advertisements constitute a veritable bacchanalian orgy of consumerism; from brandy to perfume to luggage to automobiles; from jewelry to stereo equipment to cameras - the promise is gorgeously articulated. "Buy this stuff and your friends will know how important you are. Note - not that owning this stuff will make you happy because it is so good, so valuable, so finely crafted that you will enjoy it... There is a morality in that. What consumerism promises, however, is that owning will impress your friends: they will know how successful and important you are - and their knowing and your knowing they know will constitute happiness.

Ordinarily at this point the preacher lowers the heavy artillery at materialism. The evils of enjoying the things of this world too much. Interestingly, the Bible is not nearly as tough on materialism as religion is. Religion often concludes that it is wrong, in and of itself, to accumulate anything, or to enjoy anything of quality. What the Bible teaches is that having things, accumulating wealth, will not produce happiness: in fact, it can and frequently does become an idolatrous substitute for God who is the true source of meaning and sanctity in life, that the person who lives in order to consume - is as idolatrous as those more primitive but more honest people who bowed down and sacrificed before a golden calf.

Zacchaeus, that is to say, isn't condemned in the Bible because he has accumulated wealth. His condition, rather is described as "lostness." When Jesus looked up and saw him perched in the tree, he called him, told him to come down, that he, Jesus - was going to pay a visit to Zacchaeus in his home. How long do you suppose it had been since anyone had done that? How long had it been since anyone of his old friends, any Jew at all, had sat across the table from him and enjoyed the fine place settings, the good wine, the elegant cuisine with him?

And so Zacchaeus scrambled down and the pious onlookers, the modest taxpayers of Jericho, grumbled about Jesus' choice of social companions. And Zacchaeus is so overwhelmed by this miracle of grace, this curious teacher who has broken through his isolation, that he finds himself going on and on about how hard he has tried to live a good life, how in spite of the way he earned it, he gave half his wealth to charity and exactly as the law of Moses required, meticulously reimbursed fourfold, anybody he had defrauded.

And Jesus - even though nobody has talked about salvation - although that's exactly what this story is about, and it is exactly what Zacchaeus is searching for - says - "Today salvation has come to this house." Today - wholeness, healing, reconciliation have come to Zacchaeus and that

furthermore he, Jesus, is about doing that for people who are lost. That's lost as in "taking the wrong turn and wandering about aimlessly," not lost as in "eternal damnation."

The Greek word is a disappointment to those who want to enjoy knowing that the lost are going to burn in hell. It simply means "wandering about without a goal." That's Zacchaeus ...that's the victim of success. Zacchaeus has everything except the one thing he really needs - a goal, a purpose for his living, meaning for his life. He has everything - but nothing. He has made a wrong turn. He has looked for salvation in the wrong place.

You know, in addition to the "victimization of the successful" - which won't afflict all of us - the other modern phenomenon which is relevant to this incident is the celebrated "mid-life crisis." It has not always been there but in the past decade or so we have discovered that a surprising number of people do peculiar things about half-way through life. Classically, the successful man flies off to Malabo with his secretary; the successful woman cashes it in to write poetry and make pottery. Less classically, but more commonly, people at mid-point, lose interest in life, work, play, sex, begin to drink too much, work too hard, have trouble sleeping, feel bored, get depressed, and sometime deal with it by acting foolishly.

It is, of course, a crisis of the spirit. It seems to have its origins in the two most devastating discoveries any of us ever make, namely success isn't going to save us - and - that we are not going to live forever.

And suddenly what we assumed was the preface to the exciting novel of our life - becomes the whole story, and the purposes for which we were living and striving and hoping become a prison from which we want to escape, and the relationships we have been patiently building over the years, feel like a trap and the daily activities which earn our livelihood and support ourselves and those who depend on us, feel like an exercise in meaningless perpetual motion.

That is precisely when Zacchaeus climbed a tree. And it is precisely when we are inclined to do something foolishly vulnerable.

And the Gospel here, the good news here, is that Jesus Christ waits for precisely that moment to come into our lives and gives us the healing and wholeness and direction we need.

Perhaps the deepest and most tantalizing insight of faith is that God is responsible for the hunger for God in us: that just as physical hunger is evidence of the existence of food, so the human need - the human thirst for the Divine is the best and most profound evidence for trusting that there is living water.

St. Augustine said that beautifully. "When first I knew thee, Thou didst raise me up that I might see there was somewhat for me to see." [Confessions VIII, p. 10]

God, I believe, is responsible for raising the issue. God calls into question every misplaced faith. It is the presence of God's spirit I believe that makes us ill-at-ease when we give our lives to something selfish and transitory. God is the source of joy and salvation, but God is also responsible for and the source of pain and struggle and the sense that in having everything sometimes we have nothing.

We are tempted to buy into the promise...actually to believe that having money will produce happiness. I had an aunt who used to say there was nothing wrong with her that a five pound box of $20.00 bills won't fix up. There isn't a one of us who hasn't concluded - that our fulfillment, our realized potential as human beings - has something to do with the salvation promised in the slick advertisements...

Idolatry doesn't work. "Victims of success" learn that. Zacchaeus learned it. He had lost his soul in the pursuit of success..and Jesus gave it back.

Let that little drama draw you in... There is only one place where we are "at home," and that is in the Father's house, in relationship with Jesus Christ...and that is the invitation in this colorful little story.... Ponder it... In retrospect, have you climbed a tree? Have you done something unlikely, something foolishly vulnerable precisely because you know in your heart that what you are living for is not saving your soul?

Have you done something foolish... Maybe coming to church today was it...

Maybe you are trying to love again...

Maybe you are quietly but frantically trying to make something right which you have made wrong...

Maybe you simple opened a door in your heart recently and were surprised by the power of the love and passion you keep hidden in there...

Maybe you reached out in love - or need, before you could catch yourself...

Maybe you embraced someone - or wept at the beauty of music...

That's a sign of the same dynamic that made Zacchaeus climb that tree... a sign of your need... a sign that you know about a salvation that is not yet YOURS.

And so, the invitation - in whatever quiet words you have - to allow yourself to be found.

Jesus found Zacchaeus, after all...asked him what he was doing in the tree, commanded him to come down. Zacchaeus obeyed. And I sense that in coming down, in walking home with Jesus Zacchaeus did a better and stronger and more honest thing than he had ever done before. My sense of it is that in the accepting love of Jesus, Zacchaeus found the meaning of his life, and that his life had purpose, direction, that he knew himself to be a new

creation.

Who knows what happened next? Zacchaeus may have continued his job as a tax collector. A remote tradition of the early church suggests that he became a follower, an Apostle, then a bishop. There is no evidence. All we have is a man who was despised, lonely, isolated, - no longer alone, or isolated. What we do know is that a man who had lost his integrity and dignity was given it back. What we do know is that a man who was so lost that he climbed a tree one day to find his way - was found by Jesus Christ.

And for a man who was pretending that he had it all, but knew in his heart that he had nothing - that is everything, indeed.

Amen.